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## SERMON DLXI.\*

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### THE PERSEVERANCE OF THE SAINTS.

THE subject assigned me for discourse on the present occasion is "*The Scriptural doctrine of the perseverance of the saints.*"

It is hardly fit, therefore, to take any single passage as a text. My work is prescribed. It is simply to gather up from the open Bible the doctrine in question, and to offer it to you, as near as I can, just as it comes from God.

I am not to cast the doctrine in the moulds of any denominational creed, nor to take it out of any of those moulds already run to my hand.

I shall not, therefore, at this place, even attempt to define the doctrine. If I can succeed in grasping it, and in holding it up before you, a sight of it will afford the best knowledge of what it is.

It will be admitted that there have been, and that there now are in the world, the righteous and the wicked, the regenerated and the unregenerated, the justified by faith in Jesus Christ and those whose iniquity remaineth. To one of these two great classes every man belongs.

One of the questions which we naturally raise as we read the Bible, one of deep interest, and one which we now raise, is, "*Can the truly righteous, the regenerated man, utterly fall away from his righteousness, become again unregenerate, and be lost?*"

1. Is there any thing in the nature of holiness which renders this fall impossible? Clearly not; for the Scriptures teach us

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that both holy angels and holy man, the prime father of our race, have fallen. *Mere* holiness, then, does not make utter apostasy impossible.

2. Is there any thing in the nature of regeneration which renders falling away impossible? This depends upon what its nature is. If it be a physical change, and holiness depends upon it as upon a physical cause, then we might infer that falling away could no more occur than that the sun can cease to shine. *All* sin, we should infer, would be impossible. And the passage in the 1st Epistle of John—"Whosoever is born of God . . . cannot sin, because he is born of God"—we should interpret as stating an absolute impossibility.

But this view is disproved by both Scripture and fact. The Scriptures allow that real Christians do sin, and facts prove that they do. The Scriptures and facts teach likewise that they are strongly disposed to holiness, and that, the old man having been crucified, they do not live in any known habit of sin. But the impossibility of their thus living is only parallel to that under which the Lord Jesus "could do no mighty works in Nazareth, save that he laid his hands upon a few sick folks and healed them." Shall we say, "Weak Redeemer, his power and skill must have been very limited!" Hush, lest we blaspheme! He had all power both in heaven and in earth.

But the change which is called regeneration is purely and solely *moral*. All the constitutional faculties of the soul are the same after as before the new birth. None have been taken away, none added. There is nothing, therefore, in the nature of regeneration which takes away the power of apostasy. Nay, as the change is not complete, there being produced but an imperfect holiness, and there being left remains of unsanctified affections, the regenerate person not yet glorified, in himself considered, is in far greater danger of apostasy than were the angels before their fall, than was Adam before his.

There being nothing, then, in the nature of holiness, nothing in the nature of the change in which holiness takes its origin, that renders it impossible for a righteous man to utterly apostatize, I now remark,

3. The Scriptures every where seem to assume man's freedom, and to go on the admission, as a fact, that the righteous man carries with him the power, and hence lives under the possibility of apostasy.

In the book of Ezekiel, this admission occurs frequently: "When a righteous man doth turn from his righteousness, and commit iniquity, . . . he shall die in his sin; and his righteousness which he hath done shall not be remembered."—Ezekiel iii. 20. "When the righteous turneth away from his righteousness, and committeth iniquity, and doeth according to

all the abominations that a wicked man doeth, shall he live? All his righteousness that he hath done shall not be mentioned: in his trespass that he hath trespassed, and in his sin that he hath sinned, in them shall he die."—Ezekiel xviii. 24. "When the righteous turneth from his righteousness, and committeth iniquity, he shall even die thereby."—Ezekiel xxxiii. 18. Very similar are the forms of expression in these three places, and very similar are their contexts.

The view cannot be maintained that the righteous spoken of in these passages were only *outwardly* or *apparently* so, and not *really*:

(1.) Because it is a forced construction. The simple reader who has no theory to subserve would never think that the really righteous are not here meant.

(2.) That they are the really righteous is evident, from the fact that they are contrasted with the wicked.

(3.) It is evident that they are the really righteous, because they are represented as *safe* if they maintain their righteousness; and in the same connection the wicked are spoken of as exposed to death because they have not righteousness—a righteousness which is not represented as in any way differing from that of those with whom they are contrasted.

And besides, what force or meaning would the passages have, if speaking only of a *seeming* righteousness? Why say, if a man turn from this, he shall perish, when, if he cling to it, he shall as certainly perish? Neither, if he cling to it, is he the safer; nor, if he renounce it, is he in the greater danger. Both are alike ruinous, and alike fatal.

So did not the prophet attempt to heal the hurt of the daughter of his people slightly, saying, "Peace, peace, when there was no peace."—Jer. viii. 11. He can speak only of the truly righteous and the truly wicked. There is, according to the fixed ordination of Heaven, as a settled fact in the moral world, an indissoluble connection between righteousness and life, and between wickedness and death. To this the prophet would direct the eye of the watchmen. And with the great truth burning in his own mind, he has an hypothesis for both characters: If the righteous man should become a wicked one,—or *when* such an event as this occurs, as it might, were he to use his own free powers in that direction,—his character will link him to ruin; and if the wicked man becomes righteous,—or *when* he becomes righteous,—his character will link him to life.\* If they should exchange characters, they must exchange dooms.

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\* The wicked man never becomes righteous without special grace. In this all evangelical Christians agree. Considering him, then, in himself alone, *his* power of becoming holy is never used. Shall it be thought strange, then, that the power of the Christian to apostatize is never exercised when *he* has the special grace of God to prevent it?

Of the same hypothetical character, and on the same admission of the power of the Christian to apostatize, is the remarkable passage in the Epistle to the Hebrews: "For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, and have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come, if they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame."

That reference is here made to real Christians is evident:

(1.) From the undisputed design of the epistle in which the passage occurs.

This was to prevent apostasy—apostasy of those who were addressed; and that they were addressed as any other than as acknowledged Christians, as were the different churches to whom the other epistles were written, is an absurdity too naked to need any unmasking. It would make the churches then only bands of *seeming* Christians or of hypocrites, and confine *real* religion to the apostles themselves, or banish it from the world.

(2.) That reference is made in this passage to real Christians is evident from the language used. Though the description of character might *possibly* find application to some persons in Christian communities and in Christian churches, who know nothing of that "charity" without which, whatever else they may have, they are but "sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal," mere "stony-ground" religionists; yet a plain man, with no theory to maintain, would hardly think that these were the persons meant. The Christian is clearly the only person of whom the description can be understood in its highest and best sense. Whatever may be true of any other person, *he* is enlightened, *he* tastes the heavenly gift, *he* is a partaker of the Holy Ghost, *he* tastes the good word of God, and *feels* the influence and the power of the world to come, as no unregenerate person does. The passage is both appropriate and comprehensive as a description of the true Christian.

And, besides, if they are not Christians whom the apostle means, how could he speak of renewing them *again* to repentance, and say that it is *impossible*, because they crucify the Son of God *afresh* or *again*?

(3.) That this passage relates to real Christians is evident from the aggravated character of the crime contemplated. If it should exist, it would be no ordinary offense. Vaulting up the whole gradation of human crime, it passes on, and takes its station beyond where repentance ever comes; there it stands, beyond the reach of infinite grace. As though its perpetrator had exhausted on his own person the provision made for his salvation, and had then sold its advantages, he is set forth a spiritual Esau,

his birthright of grace despised and lost, his tears of no avail to regain it !

Of the same character is the passage in the 10th chapter of this epistle : " If we sin wilfully, after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful looking-for of judgment and fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries." If we Christians, with forethought of intention, apostatize, (that this is the sin spoken of, the context renders evident,) there is no other, no second Saviour provided for us ; nothing remains for us but a fearful judgment and a fiery doom.

Now, no one supposes that falling away from any common illumination of the gospel, any common participation of Christian benefits, any common influences of the Spirit, any common regard for the divine Word, any mere external governance of the life by the hopes and the fears of the coming world—in short, no one supposes that falling into absolute infidelity, from the very threshold of the heavenly kingdom, is attended with such hopelessness as that brought to view in these passages. The Scriptures, and Christian ministers, in fulfilling their commission, call upon the wicked, the abandoned, the errorist, the infidel, whatever may have been his past experience, to repent, to return to the Lord, who will have mercy, and to our God, who will abundantly pardon. But on what principle is this free and universal offer of life made to many in every Christian community, if these passages relate to sinners who have only trembled like Felix, washed their hands like Pilate, prayed and wondered like Simon the sorcerer ?

In anticipation of what I have yet to say, I here remark that the fact of this universal offer of salvation, free and ample for all, proves that though the Christian, by the exercise of his powers, *might* fall away, he in fact never does ; for if he did, then for his sin there would be no sacrifice, and fallen Christians would constitute a class in every community to whom the offer of life could not be made.

And now, I further remark that the promises and threatenings *generally*, which are addressed to Christians, allow the possibility of their apostasy. If the command which comes to the sinner to obey the gospel, implies that he possesses ability so to do, either natural or gracious, so do the warnings to Christians imply that *they* have ability to plunge into ruin. They are told that he that *endureth* to the end shall be saved ; and that he that *overcometh* shall inherit all things. " Take heed, brethren," says the apostle, " lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God ; but exhort one another daily, while it is called to-day, lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin."

The doctrine of the perseverance of the saints admits *fully* that Christians have free will; that they have ability to apostatize, and, in themselves considered, are in great danger of it. And hence the true doctrine *includes*, as one of its essential elements, the use and influence of promises, threatenings, and the various means which God has ordained to the work of preserving his saints.

I pass now to a second inquiry, more momentous than the one which we have been considering. Is the power to apostatize, fearful as it is, in itself considered, ever exercised; or, as a matter of fact, will every truly regenerated person so persevere in holiness as to be finally saved? Does God, who has the certain knowledge of all certain events, give us any answer to this question in the revelation of truth, so that *we* may have any certain knowledge on the subject? Or are we left with at least half as much uncertainty as to the salvation of the saint as of the sinner? And must every Christian, however certain he may be that he is now a child of God, be constantly agitated with the fear that he shall become a child of the Devil, and be lost? And must the joy of the heavenly host over the repenting sinner ever be clouded and chilled with the fear that he may yet be given up of his God, and lie down in hell?

The answer to this question clearly must have an important practical influence; it has not a little to do with our hopes and our fears, our agitation and our tranquillity, as Christians not yet glorified. What, then, saith the Scriptures?

Far back in the comparatively dim light of the old dispensation it was proclaimed—"The righteous shall hold on his way, and he that hath clean hands shall be stronger and stronger." "The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord, and he delighteth in his way. Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down, for the Lord upholdeth him with his hand." "The path of the just is as the shining light, which shineth more and more unto the perfect day."

And when the Saviour came, and "spake as never man spake," what were his words? Did he annul the intimation of the ancient Scriptures, or did he cast upon it the clear light which he came to reveal, and raise it to a certainty? "And this is the Father's will which hath sent me, that of all which he hath given me, I should lose nothing, but should raise it up again at the last day. . . . Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that believeth on me *hath everlasting life*. . . . I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if any man eat of this bread, *he shall live for ever*. . . . Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, *hath everlasting life*." "Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, *hath everlasting life*, and shall not come into condemnation; but is *passed*



from death unto life." "*The water that I shall give him, shall be in him a well of water springing up unto everlasting life.*"

What can be clearer than these words of the Great Teacher? None that were given to him shall be lost. And the dividing line which he fixes between death and life is not drawn across the farther end of the believer's course, but across its beginning. In his first exercise of justifying faith, in his first partaking of the Redeemer's flesh and blood, in his new birth, he actually passes the line between death and life; henceforth, because He in whom his life is lives, he shall live also. Not that he shall be compelled to go to heaven, whether he will or not. "My sheep," says the Great Shepherd, "*hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me* : and I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any pluck them out of my hand. My Father, which gave them me, [those of whom I am to lose none,] is greater than all; and none is able to pluck them out of my Father's hand." How perfectly do these words guard every sheep of the fold! These are the ones who are in the everlasting covenant, of whom God has declared, "I will not turn away from them to do them good;" not, if they are faithful, and turn not away from me; but, "*I will put my fear in their hearts, that they shall not depart from me.*" These are the elect, whom the Saviour declared it impossible for false Christs and false prophets, with all their signs and wonders, to deceive. These are they who are kept by the power of God, through faith, unto salvation; they whom God will not suffer to be tempted above what they are able to bear, but, in his wisdom, and by his power, will ever, in faithfulness, make a way for their escape.

And I now further remark, that this doctrine is not only clearly intimated in the Old Testament, and clearly taught by the Lord Jesus, but it is proclaimed and exulted in by the apostles. "And we know," says Paul, "that all things work together for good to them that love God, who are the called according to his purpose." How so? May they not by any enemy or instrumentality be deceived, ensnared, ruined? By no means. "For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son. . . . Moreover, whom he did predestinate, them he also called; and whom he called, them he also justified; and whom he justified, them he also glorified." Here is a complete and heaven-wrought chain, linking those whom God foreknew to glory; and it is described as already finished in the purpose of Jehovah.

And it is not important to the doctrine in hand, let it be distinctly observed, which of the three main significations claimed for the word *foreknow*, is given to it. Give it the Arminian one, *prescience of repentance and faith*; or the mixed one, *loved or approved*, whether from a foresight of obedience or not; or give

it the sense *to select or determine upon*, the Calvinistic election of grace, and the chain in either case remains alike unbroken. Whom God knew would repent and believe, or whom he loved from a foresight of goodness or otherwise, or whom he selected of his own good will as the subjects of regeneration, *them* he predestinated to a conformity to the image of his Son, [to be holy.] . . . Moreover, whom he did predestinate, [to be holy,] them he also called; and whom he called, them he also justified; and whom he justified, them he also glorified.

And then, in view of this chain of grace, joining every true believer to glory, the fervid apostle kindles into exultation, and triumphantly exclaims, as if in defiance of all the enemies of the Church of God, "If God be for us, who can be against us? . . . . Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? . . . . Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors, through him that loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." Perfectly confident was the apostle that He who began a good work in Christians would perform (finish) it; and that the gifts and calling of God are without repentance—not abandoned.

And how childish and short-sighted is the answer so often made to the above triumphant passage of the apostle, that this is all *conditional*; none of these things can separate a Christian from the love of God unless he *yields* to them? Indeed! and who ever supposed they could? Is there any other way for a Christian to fall than by yielding to evil? Does the objector think this passage means that no creature is stronger than God, and that all this triumphing of the apostle is a mere flourish of trumpets over the fact that no creature of earth or hell can make effectual war upon the Almighty, and tear away an obedient child from his arms? If this is not what he thinks, then he is entertaining himself with a mere truism, which, of course, *nobody* denies: nothing can ruin the child of God unless he yields. And this is the precise point to which the whole passage relates. As there is no other way to pluck a child from His hands but by inducing apostasy, it is over the want of power in all the enemies of the Christian to effect this that the apostle triumphs so exultingly. His assurance was, and ours is, that all the wisdom, wonders, temptations, lies, allurements, and enchantments of men and devils, cannot cause a Christian to apostatize from his God!

Another inquiry: Does the perseverance of the saint, thus revealed, thus promised, and hence sure, consist in simply retaining the grace and obedience possessed immediately on conver-



sion, or does it involve a progress and a growth? Is the Christian stereotyped at the moment of the new birth? and does he pass on through a life which is a dead level, or does he grow and travel in a path which leads upward where the light is clearer, the atmosphere purer—nearer heaven and nearer God?

To this question the Bible returns no unequivocal answer. It represents the life of the Christian as any thing but stereotyped, and on the same plane with the point of his departure. Though he sometimes falls into sin, and sometimes backslides from a point to which he had previously attained, yet, on the whole, his strength increases, and his progress is upward. Having clean hands, he grows stronger and stronger; and being just, his path shineth more and more unto the perfect day.

In the New Testament, this feature of the saints' perseverance is frequently taught in the clearest form. The Christian is at first *a babe in Christ*, from which he grows to *a perfect man in Christ*. His religious life is symbolized by the figure of a mustard-seed growing to a tree; of leaven leavening the whole lump; of grain in the progress of growth: "first the blade, then the ear, afterwards the full corn in the ear."

The figure of a warfare, too, under which his life is represented, and in which he is the habitual victor, includes the idea of progress; just as though he conquered one foe, and then passed on to attack another; subdued one sin or evil passion, and then addressed his efforts to another; and so prosecuted his course, growing in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ, until he arrives home in glory.

Thus I have endeavored to educe from the Scriptures their teaching on the subject of the perseverance of the saints. Though possessing free will and the power to apostatize, they will—for God promises that they shall—persevere in holiness—a holiness increasing, on the whole, to the end of life—and ultimately enter into glory.

What God knows will occur, and what he hence promises shall occur, I now remark, he knows and promises as depending upon foreseen agency or instrumentality. The saints' perseverance has such a dependence as this. God foresees and appoints it. Do the Scriptures teach us any thing in relation to this dependence?

Most clearly they do; and we turn for a moment to what may be styled the saints' *preservation*. Though they persevere, it is by virtue of their preservation. They are kept; they do not keep themselves alone: "Kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation."

This power of God, it is evident from the nature of the case, is not the same as that by which the worlds were made, and by which the stars are kept in the heavens. It is the power

he has of securing the moral results which his benevolence demands; and it lies rather in his wisdom than in his natural attribute of strength. He is so wise that he is able to preserve all his saints; he is so wise that he has mighty power in securing to them the faith through which they are kept, and which links them indissolubly to life.

Without dwelling upon the atonement of Christ—a wonderful power of God to accomplish moral effects, and which is emphatically the offspring of his wisdom, and yet *in itself* alone relates to the sinner as much as to the saint—I would direct you to one of the agencies by which he preserves the saints; namely, Christ's intercession. This he did for his disciples just before he suffered; and for all who, after them, should believe on him. And now, since his ascension, as the apostle repeatedly declares, he ever appeareth in the presence of God, to make intercession for his people. To this agency has he been appointed, and in it he must continue to the end, when he will cease, delivering up the kingdom to the Father, and laying down all authority and power.

And, in connection with these intercessions, which God the Father ever hears, there is, with direct reference to the saint, the office-work of the Spirit, and the instrumentality of the truth: "Chosen unto salvation," he is said to be, "through sanctification of the Spirit, and belief of the truth." Dwelling in the children of God, the Holy Spirit *seals* them, and gives them an *earnest* of their future inheritance, a part as a surety of what remaineth. And the *truth* is essential to the existence of faith—for how can they believe on him of whom they have not heard?—and of course essential to all the saving effects of faith on the life. The truth, as is evident from every page of the sacred record, is a fit and indispensable instrumentality, by which not only to begin but to perpetuate holiness, to strengthen and sustain the soul in its onward sanctifying work and preparation for glory.

Thus it would seem that the *perseverance* of the saints, when viewed in its relation to the agencies and means by which it is effected—foreseen of God as they are, and appointed in his wisdom—might more appropriately be styled the saints' *preservation*. True, it depends upon the free will, but more upon free grace; true, the saint *perseveres*, but he is kept by the power of God; he practises holiness, but only as he is drawn to it by the Holy Spirit. God is first in all the process, executing the demands of his own benevolence and glory.

I remark now,

1. The true doctrine of the perseverance of the saints makes the final salvation of the Christian *conditional*. It says, "He that endureth to the end shall be saved," and no others. It says that if the Christian should fall away, he would not only perish, but he could not be renewed again to repentance.

2. The true doctrine of the perseverance of the saints makes the final salvation of the Christian *certain*. It insures the performance of the condition upon which that salvation is based ; it says that he shall hold on his way, and wax stronger and stronger. It puts into the mouth of the Church, in relation to all apostates, "They went out from us, because they were not of us ; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us." Christ says that he knows his sheep. This doctrine claims that at the last day he shall truly say to every apostate, with how many tongues soever he may have spoken ; with whatever gifts of prophecy, of knowledge, or of faith, he may have been endowed ; whatever goods he may have given to the poor ; however clean he may have been washed from the pollutions of the world ; how often soever he may have eaten and drunk at his table, "I *never* knew you ; depart from me, all ye workers of iniquity."

A conditional salvation, and a certain one, both harmonize in this doctrine, because the performance of the condition is certain also.

3. The true doctrine of the perseverance of the saints demands the diligent use of all the means of promoting the divine life. The Christian cannot say, "If I am to persevere, I shall persevere, let me do as I will." The doctrine is, that he wills to persevere ; and to say that he will persevere, if he wills not to, is to deny the doctrine. The certainty of a thing by no means tends to relax efforts for its attainment, especially when efforts are appointed and ordained to the end. What general ever doubted that his soldiers would fight more bravely, if he could inspire them with the assurance of victory ? What teacher ever doubted that his pupils would be more diligent, if he could make them certain of getting their lessons ? Paul did not allow the assurance he had of his own salvation to prevent his keeping his body under ; he did not allow the pledge he had that he should see Rome to prevent his seeking the protection of the Roman centurion, that he might not be put to death by the forty Jews who had bound themselves under a curse that they would neither eat nor drink till they had killed him. And when he was sailing to Rome, he did not allow the certainty, not only that his own life should be preserved from the perils of the deep, but also the lives of all those who sailed with him, and which certainty he had already proclaimed to them, to prevent his saying, when the seamen were preparing to leave the ship, "Except these abide in the ship, ye cannot be saved."

Any thing may be certain and yet conditional, the performance of the condition being certain also. And the certainty of the perseverance of the saints in a growing Christian life, involves their willingness, and watchfulness, and prayer ; their study of the Holy Scriptures, their crucifying the flesh, with its affections and

lusts. These, together with the Redeemer's intercessions and the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, ever sustain their foreseen and appointed connection with the perseverance of the saints.

So the real tendency of this doctrine upon a mind rightly disposed is to prompt it to an undivided effort to realize the certainty foretold. As to the wicked and the self-deceived, they may abuse it to their injury and undoing, as they do even the long-suffering of God.

4. This doctrine claims that all true Christians have been given to Christ; that they were chosen to salvation, through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth; that they compose a redeemed fold, gathered from all nations, and kindreds, and tongues, freely following the Great Shepherd; and that none of them shall be finally lost.

But did not Christ say to the Father, some one may reply, "Those whom thou hast given me, I have kept, and none of them is lost but the son of perdition," implying that he had lost *one* who had been given him?

This passage is easily explained by a reference to similar ones, and to a prevalent principle of language: "Many widows were in Israel in the days of Elias," says Christ, "but to none of them was Elias sent, save unto Sarepta, a city of Sidon, to a woman that was a widow." That is, he was not sent to a widow in Israel, but to a widow in Sidon. And, "There were many lepers in Israel in the time of Eliseus, the prophet, but none of them were cleansed, save Naaman, the Syrian." That is, no Israelite was cleansed; but Naaman, the Syrian, was cleansed. So precisely in this passage: "None that thou gavest me is lost; but the son of perdition" is lost. The avaricious apostle, "a devil," the betrayer, chosen for wise reasons to be a witness to his works and his innocence, never a Christian—he is lost. He fell from the apostleship, that he might "go to his own place."

It is one of the principles of this doctrine, that the Church is sifted, at least in part, of her hypocrites and unregenerated members, by the temptations, and trials, and heresies with which they are assailed. Not having root in themselves, as the Saviour teaches in the parable of the sower, they endure but for a while; the cares of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches, choke the word, and tribulation or persecution arising, they fall. And "there must be also," the apostle says, "heresies among you, that they which are approved may be made manifest."

This doctrine teaches that the true Christian will be kept from fatal heresy as well as fatal crime; and, according to it, the belief of doctrines which subvert the gospel, as decisively reveals an enemy of the cross, as does the practice of iniquity a man unwashed from his sins.

5. The true doctrine of the perseverance of the saints has

a place in it for promises, warnings, and exhortations to continuance in well-doing. This should be ever held in remembrance by the religious teacher. It includes and demands the ministry and the ordinances of the Church. The Christian is to be trained up from a spiritual babe to a spiritual man. Every moment he carries with him ability to step aside and seal his ruin! Nay, if left to himself, he will certainly do it. In these instrumentalities and agencies, which are of God, is lodged a measure of the power by which he keeps his saints; and he sets them forth as ordained to the end. They *tend* to the Christian's preservation. The minister of Christ, having all confidence in the piety of his church, may address them, after the example of Paul, as "*holy brethren*" and "*partakers of the heavenly calling*;" and then point them to the Hebrews who rebelled in the wilderness, and fell short of the promised land; and solemnly warn them against sin, and exhort them to watchfulness, lest *they* fall in the way, and come short of the promised rest. No doctrine of the perseverance of the saints inconsistent with this is of God.

Finally, I remark—This doctrine makes perseverance in an increasing holiness *an essential attribute of the Christian character*. He, therefore, in whom it is not found, whatever may have been his past experience or his present standing, can have no *certain* ground of belief that he is a member of the family of Christ. The backslider can have no such ground until he returns to his God, and sees himself living in a new and increasing obedience.

On the other hand, my brethren, of this doctrine this is the consolation: just so far as any one of you has the assurance that perseverance in an increasing holiness is an attribute of your character, just so far you may have the assurance of your own final salvation. God has joined the two together. Weak as you are in yourselves, conscious as you may be of your own hearts' instability, the subject of earth's and hell's machinations, yet in God is your strength. He knoweth how to deliver you. Though trembling and fearful you may make your way over the storm-field of earth, you shall not be tempted above what you are able to bear. You have already passed the line between death and life: here you are safe; hereafter you shall triumph.

## SERMON DLXII.

BY REV. WM. T. HAMILTON, D. D., MOBILE, ALA.

## THE DYING THIEF;

OR, MARKS OF AN ACCEPTED FAITH.

"Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom."—LUKE XXIII: 42.

How unexpected the sound, how impressive the utterance of these words, in the strange and exciting circumstances of the scene, as described by the Evangelists!

For two or three years, Jerusalem had been filled with varying and contradictory rumors concerning the movements and the pretensions of one of obscure birth and mean condition; a person originally from Galilee, and who was known to have been long wandering up and down the country, having no fixed place of abode, but propagating every where his extravagant doctrines, and consorting, for the most part, with the dregs of the people. He had occasionally been seen in the capital city itself, and usually his footsteps had been followed by tumultuous crowds, whose vociferous acclamations had more than once proclaimed him a prophet, and hailed him even as the Son of David. Nay, some had been heard to assert, with great confidence, that this Galilean prophet had actually performed sundry miraculous cures on the sick, the impotent, the blind; and certain indistinct whisperings had penetrated even the highest circles in Jerusalem, about his having raised from the grave and restored to his afflicted relatives, somewhere about the suburbs of the holy city itself, a young man of respectable connections, who was known to have died, and to have lain buried for some time. But the populace are always credulous and superstitious both, and it is well known that rumor loses nothing by circulation.

Certain it was, however, that whatever the opinions of the vulgar might be, the learned and the prominent men of the nation gave no credit to the pretensions of this would-be prophet.

On some charge connected with the claims involved in his assumed character, he had been arrested by order of the chief priests; he had been arraigned before the Sanhedrim, the great council of the nation; by them he had been handed over to the Roman governor, Pilate; after an open trial, he had been condemned to death; and at this very hour he was in the hands of the officers of justice, assigned to execution in company, as it was generally understood, with two other notorious criminals: nay, even now the execution was in progress.

Pass, then, at once to the busy scene; it is but a short distance



from the city; and there, where the multitude are congregated around that slight eminence, the well-known Calvary, you have the whole before you.

On the spot so fitly designated *Golgotha*, the place of skulls, you may see, high above the heads of the populace, three outstretched forms, each fast nailed to the horrible cross. The Roman centurion, with his guard of soldiery, is at hand. There, too, you may note the high priest, with his numerous attendants; there stand the Pharisees, scowling with undisguised hatred on him who hangs on the middle cross, the centre of interest to all; for that is he whom the populace so lately hailed as the greatest of prophets, whom now they denounce as an impious impostor, unfit to live! Bitter taunts break from the ranks of the Jewish priests gazing near. "*He saved others; let him save himself, if he be, as he pretended, God's chosen Messiah!*" The soldiers, too, rough and unthinking, as is the wont of their class, throw out cruel jeers: "*If thou be the King of the Jews, save thyself!*"

Nay, the very thieves hanging at his side seem to catch the general spirit of mockery; for one of them railed on him, saying, "*If thou be the Christ, save thyself and us!*"

And is there no eye to pity, no heart to feel, no voice to utter tones of sympathy for one around whom, but a few hours ago, thousands were thronging with congratulation, with triumphant hallelujahs, and with songs of praise? None! The priests themselves mock him; the soldiery jeer him; the fickle populace wag their heads in derision, and shoot out the lip; and outlawry and crime itself affect to look down upon him as basest of the base! Who, in such a scene, would venture to brave this unequivocal indication of public sentiment, by treating with even a shadow of respect one thus openly proscribed and universally abhorred! Had you and I been there, our feelings would doubtless have fallen in with the popular current; our lips would have curled with equal scorn, and possibly our voices would have risen with biting mockery too.

But yet, amid this general torrent of insult, one voice, one solitary voice rises in another strain, and that too from a quarter whence it might perhaps be least expected. With the reckless hardihood of desperate villany, one of the suffering malefactors had thrown insult in the teeth of the crucified Galilean prophet; but the other culprit promptly and boldly reproved him: "*Dost thou not fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? and we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this man hath done nothing amiss.*"

After this burst of honest indignation, he turned to the calumniated companion of their shame, and accosted him in the words of my text: "*Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.*"

Employed at such a time, and under such circumstances;

employed in addressing a person condemned and scorned; writhing though he was in nature's last agonies; taunted on all hands as a blasphemous impostor; spurned of men, and rejected, as it might seem, of Heaven itself; this one brief sentence not only evinces profound respect, but it is a monument unparalleled of faith; of true, genuine, saving faith in the Redeemer of mankind; of faith unsurpassed and unexampled. History presents nothing like it; earth has never seen its fellow. *It was AN ACCEPTED FAITH*; and, thief though he was, perishing though he was, even then, under the merited stroke of human justice, the dying Saviour, whom he was not ashamed to acknowledge as such, even beneath the heavy cloud of shame that then was obscuring his glory, pronounced the blessed assurance to him: *"This day shalt thou be with me in paradise."*

Here, then, we may discern the *"marks of an acceptable faith;"* and on the possession or the want of such a faith, your destiny and mine for eternity must depend.

1st. *True faith is self-condemnatory*; it is rooted and grounded in *sincere repentance*.

In the Word of God, Christ is presented to us as a Saviour of the lost. He offers pardon to the guilty.

It was for sinners undone by their transgressions that the Redeemer undertook to procure pardon and justification before God, and for such only.

If I *merit* not condemnation, I need no pardon; and until I discern distinctly and fully that I am guilty, and righteously condemned, I cannot *feel* my need of pardon; and not feeling my need of it, I cannot *desire* it. The thief hanging at the Saviour's side did feel his guilt; he acknowledged to his companion in guilt the perfect equity of the punishment he was enduring, even at the hands of his fellow-men; and, by plain implication, much more did he deserve punishment at the hands of God. This, his language both to his fellow-culprit and to the Saviour clearly implies. He makes no attempt to conceal, to justify, or to palliate his guilt. He acknowledges it distinctly and fully. *"We, indeed, justly."* And thus, taking the entire blame on himself alone, he throws himself at once on the clemency of the suffering Messiah at his side. A similar heartfelt contrition, an unsparing self-condemnation, is the uniform attendant on a saving faith. *"He that humbleth himself shall be exalted."* *"If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins."* But, *"whoso covereth his sins shall not prosper."*

Let it, then, be distinctly understood and carefully remembered, that without this sincere and unaffected condemnation of himself, as deserving the fearful curse of God's law, there is and there can be in no man an acceptable faith in the Saviour, who alone delivers from the curse of the law. It is only when filled with a touching

sense of his personal unworthiness, that any man can urge aright the appeal of the dying thief: "*Lord, remember me.*"

2d. But his faith was also *unhesitating, full, and confiding*. Whatever may have been the process by which his mind had been led to the conclusion that the taunted sufferer hanging at his side was the long-expected Messiah of his nation, the hope of Israel, and the refuge of the guilty, no sooner, as it would seem, was that conclusion actually reached, than he acted upon it promptly and at once, and urged his appeal to Jesus, desperate though his case might appear. Condemned of men, condemned of God, and condemned by his own conscience, he probably felt that the shame and the torment he was then enduring were but the foretaste of deeper pangs and a darker doom awaiting him, when the law of man should have done its worst upon his body.

Human sympathy could no more avail him; Divine Justice frowned upon him. Beside him was one, covered indeed with obloquy, and loaded with shame, yet one whom he saw reason to regard as not only innocent of crime, but holy; a prophet of God, yea, the long-expected Messiah. The ancient prophets, he well knew, had in their day been rejected and killed; and perhaps even then some of the prophecies respecting the wounding and bruising of God's chosen servant, and those setting forth the taking away of sin by the sacrifice of himself, to be made by Messiah the Prince, recurred to his thoughts; and then, as he heard the unfeeling taunts and the base charges thrown out against the meek sufferer he beheld at his side, it may be that he recalled the rumors he had heard of devils cast out, of diseases removed, yea, of life restored to the dead by this very sufferer. It may be, even, that he had himself witnessed some of these manifestations of superhuman power and benignity on the part of this his fellow-sufferer, so immeasurably superior as he felt him to be above himself, in all moral qualities; and, as he thus eyed him, and thus reflected, conviction gradually fastened on his mind, and moved his heart, and awakened even hope in his guilty bosom. Here, if any where in the wide universe of God, might lie the power to rescue even him from at least the second death; and with that conviction he turns, reproves his scoffing companion, acknowledges his own guilt, and then, to the suffering yet spotless victim suspended between them, at once he prefers his plea: "*Lord, remember me.*" There is no hesitancy, no circumlocution, no peradventure in his language or his movements. He sees his guilt; he feels his peril; he thinks that he discerns in Jesus evidence of power to help him; and at once and earnestly his suit is urged: "*Lord, remember me.*" No conditions are proposed, no terms offered; he throws his hopes on the mere mercy of him he styles Lord. All he asks is remembrance, notice, pity; just what his Lord, of his own spontaneous goodness, might be disposed to do for him.

And truly, this is the genuine temper of true faith. While only alarmed under conviction of sin, a man will attempt much, and do much, and promise more, in hope of obtaining favor with God; but when thoroughly humbled; when, really penitent, he begins to apprehend the true character, the all-sufficiency, and the matchless grace of Christ Jesus, as *the Saviour*, pre-eminently and alone, he then abandons all self-reliance; he throws aside every condition; he offers no terms; he simply and cordially submits to the good pleasure, the unrestricted disposal of God in Christ; and the language of his very heart is, "*Lord, remember me.*" If Christ, as the Saviour, as the Redeemer, will but remember me, a sinner, he will remember me as the Saviour, mighty to deliver, rich in grace, and not as an angry judge. "*Lord, remember me.*"

3d. But again: *His faith was frank and open.* There is a noble ingenuousness in this appeal of the dying thief, that is worthy of all admiration, and of all imitation too. He spake, not to one courted, admired, and applauded; it was not in the hour of the Galilean prophet's triumph, when the risen Lazarus was before him; when those who had long been lame, halt, crippled, paralytic, or lunatic, were gratefully proclaiming the power that had healed them; not when thousands miraculously fed by his hand were shouting his praise, and hailing him as the prophet foretold, the Son of David, Israel's long-promised Messiah-King! No, no, no! All that was past and gone. The dying thief spake to Jesus, the despised, calumniated, condemned Jesus, when hanging on the cross; when surrounded by a hooting crowd, mocked by the rude soldiery, and bitterly taunted by the priests and scribes of his nation. Nay, the very man thus hated, rejected, scorned, charged with blasphemy, and actually dying under the hands of the public executioner, this once guilty thief, but now right-minded and noble-hearted penitent, addressed in terms of profound respect, of reverence, nay, of adoration. He styles him Lord, solicits his favorable notice, and throws himself on his mercy. There is here discovered a matchless moral grandeur in this dying thief.

Unmoved by example, unawed by power, unaffected by ridicule, contempt or mockery, this boldest of believers judged for himself, and obeyed the impulse of his own conscience; and, while all the world rejected Jesus; while his very disciples were hiding in cowardly desertion; this poor, suffering criminal, this despised outlaw, this guilty, but now penitent thief, dared, alone and in defiance of Jews and Romans, of torturers and scoffers, to single out the very person on whom all others thus heaped contumely and insult, as the one whom his heart and his voice, solitary though it was, should hail in open acknowledgment, as *the great Prophet, the promised Messiah, the Lord of all, the one only hope of his guilty, his perishing soul*: "*Lord, remember me.*"

Such is always the temper of a true faith. That religion which is avowed only when popularity attends it, and which shrinks and retires and hides its head when contempt and opposition assail it, is spurious and unsound! May not some who among us are ranked as Christians, find cause to blush, on a comparison with this poor, dying thief?

Some there are who would feel deeply affronted, should we question their veracity, their ingenuousness, their frankness; and yet in places and at times where religion was reputable and the Saviour honored, they avowed themselves the friends of religion and followers of the Saviour. But, on passing into scenes and moving in a society where the Saviour is contemned and his religion is in disrepute, they cast away the badge of discipleship, and strive to conceal every token of connection with Christ! Ah! how little, how fickle, how base the conduct of such, compared with the noble frankness of the guilty thief, addressing the Saviour, as he did, when surrounded by mocking thousands, "*Lord, remember me!*"

4th. Once more. *His faith was spiritual; it looked through and over all mere outward circumstances.*

It was in disregard of all outward appearances, in contempt of mere external circumstances, in defiance of all that met the senses, that the penitent thief acted and spoke. So far as the senses alone could report, there was nothing to inspire respect, nothing to awaken confidence or to infuse hope!

He himself was condemned, and dying as a criminal. By his side hung one in like condemnation, a criminal to all appearance; a base and impious impostor, said the popular voice. Thus his companion in suffering was *denounced* by the heads of the church, condemned of the magistrate, and suffering under the hands of the public executioner; the eyes of thousands were scowling at him; the popular cry was loud and clamorous against him; and to all appearance he was a guilty man, suffering but as his crimes deserved.

But all this biased not the judgment of the poor thief. Whence he had derived his information, we know not; but in this rejected sufferer he saw only an innocent being, the victim of popular caprice and cunning malice. His benevolent actions, his pure and heavenly doctrines, his surprising miracles, and his present meekness and patience, all combined to bring conviction to the heart of the thief, long before those prodigies of darkness and earthquake that afterwards sent conviction to the breast of the centurion; and this outlawed sufferer hesitated not to avow his deep convictions, in the earnest plea he advanced, "*Lord, remember me!*" Every other thought seemed lost in a view of the spiritual excellence of the suffering Nazarene and his own spiritual necessities. He asks for no honors, no emoluments, no dis-



tinctions in Messiah's kingdom! All he sued for was a kind remembrance by the dying Saviour: "*Lord, remember me!*"

And such is always the spirit, such the appropriate language of true faith. The burden of sin presses heavily on the heart. Deliverance from sin is the one great boon needed. Reconciliation with God is the one only honor coveted; and in comparison with this, all else is lost out of view and forgotten. "*Lord, remember me!*"

5th. This becomes yet more apparent, in that *the object petitioned for has respect exclusively to the higher interests of a life beyond the grave.*

The other malefactor, yet impenitent, discovers, even in his scoffing request, the groveling desires of his soul: "*If thou be the Christ, save thyself and us!*" A rescue from the cross, deliverance from pain, from infamy, from death, and restoration to life, to freedom, to enjoyment on earth, constituted the sum and substance of his wishes. It would seem as if he could not raise even a thought higher!

Not so with his now right-minded companion. He felt pain as keenly, shrank from shame as sensitively, and shuddered at death as involuntarily as did the other. He saw, too, what the other saw not, one abundantly able to rescue him from even these evils, so abhorrent to our nature. But on these he spends not a thought. He looks above and beyond them all! He sees at his side the Son of David, the Messiah of God, the spiritual King, who was to reign in righteousness, long as the sun and the moon should endure. In this kingdom, pure, spiritual and eternal, incapable of being affected by the ills of life, and even by the pangs of death, which was already fast invading his tortured frame, he now desires a portion; and therefore to Him, its glorious Head and King, (clouded though his kingly glory is for the time,) he ventures openly and confidently, yet humbly, to address himself: "*Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.*"

But a few days ago, he was an abandoned profligate, a daring ruffian, trampling under foot the laws alike of God and man, in order to gratify his passions, and to seize on unlawful wealth! But now he is an altered man. His lust of gain is eradicated; his fierce passions are subdued; his love of life itself is forgotten under the impulse of higher, nobler, holier motives. He pants for the life of his soul, for exemption from *sin*, to which he had long been a slave; and totally regardless of the infamy that covered him, of the pain that was racking every fibre of his frame, and of the contempt and mockery that surrounded them both, without spending a thought even on the pangs of death which he knew and felt must soon be upon him; he looked beyond death and beyond the grave, and laid his earnest suit, his one only petition before Him in whom, amid the degradation that



covered him, his *faith* beheld the *Lord of life and glory*; and "*Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom,*" burst from his laboring heart.

To one judging from appearances only, nothing could be more inappropriate, ill-timed, or absurd, than such an appeal. So far as mere unaided reason could judge, this prayer would seem to breathe the *bitterest mockery*. And yet it was, in truth, the breathing of a faith, sterling, strong, and noble beyond all example that has been furnished in the history of our race.

Christian communicant, is *yours* such a faith in the suffering Lamb of God?

Like the faith of the noble-minded thief, is yours *humble* and self-condemnatory? Is it unhesitating, full, and confiding? Is it open, frank, true to its object through evil and through good report? Is it spiritual also? Does it lead you to disregard all mere external appearances, and fasten the best affections of your heart on the blessed Redeemer? And does it prompt you to overlook the interests of time, when put in competition with those of eternity? Are you conscious of a solicitude, deep and habitual, for a portion in the blessings of Christ's spiritual kingdom; a solicitude stronger, more abiding, more influential on your motives and your actions, than any other object, however important in itself? If so, and only if so, is your faith a genuine and accepted one, like that of the guilty but penitent thief, whose dying plea, "*Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom,*" drew from the Son of God himself the wonderful response, "*This day shalt thou be with me in paradise.*"

In conclusion, I have but two remarks to offer:

1st. *The subject before us shows that no one need despair.*

It is a quaint remark, none the less forcible for its quaintness, nor for the frequency with which it is repeated, that "The Bible furnishes us with one example of a man crying successfully for mercy in his dying hour, to show that no sinner need despair; while yet only one instance of the kind is given, as if purposely to warn *all* against presumption."

And so indeed it is, and most impressive is the lesson it conveys.

It is, I think, not improbable, that in every community, and perhaps in every congregation of Christian worshippers, are some who need just such encouragement as this example gives. To such I would affectionately say: You feel that you are guilty; you are sensible that you yourselves are in peril, and that unless you be converted and become reconciled to the mighty God through Jesus Christ his Son, you will be lost, for ever lost!

It is even so. But you do not feel your hearts touched with true compunction. You are conscious that the power of sin is not yet subdued within you; that even the love of sin is not yet

destroyed ; and you cannot feel that you have a right to approach the Saviour. You sometimes even fear, ay, truly and sadly fear, that for *you* salvation is hopeless ; that you are abandoned of God already.

To all such my earnest counsel is, consider attentively the case of the dying thief ; and where could you find a case, how could you even imagine one, to all appearance more hopeless than was his ? And yet he applied to the Redeemer. He was heard ; he was accepted ; he was pardoned and saved. And at this moment, the poor guilty thief, who on Calvary mingled his earnest prayer with his dying breath, as he hung by the suffering Saviour's side, is a ransomed spirit, surrounded by the pure joys of heaven, hymning the praises of redeeming mercy. And why ? Examine his case closely, and the grand secret will become at once apparent. He stopped not to deplore his own hopeless prospects ; but, once aroused to discern his guilt and his peril, he looked away from himself ; he turned promptly to the mighty Redeemer ; and he threw himself, just as he was, guilty and perishing, without excuse and without delay, on the abounding mercy of that Saviour. "*Lord, remember me ;*" it was the soul's deep echo of the sinking Peter's cry, "*Lord, save, or I perish !*"

Go, ye resolute and desponding ones, go cast yourselves wholly and unreservedly into this mighty Saviour's hands, and peace, light, strength, and joy will spring up in your troubled hearts too.

2d. Once more. *To the Christian, when contemplating an approach to the Lord's table*, this subject is *rich in instruction and replete with encouragement*.

When preparing to surround the table of your crucified Redeemer, in commemoration of his love, you know that you are to be moved by a thankful remembrance of his death, as the great atoning sacrifice for sin.

On each such hallowed occasion, you have sins to confess, pardon to solicit, strength to implore, and every spiritual blessing to ask of him. Draw near, then, to that sacred table, with unwavering confidence, with an honest and a believing mind. Open your whole heart before your Lord. Tell him all your sorrows ; acknowledge all your weaknesses, your follies and your sins, and ask, with a holy confidence, for every mercy and every blessing you need.

And while you affectionately remember Jesus at his table, doubt not that He who on the cross listened graciously to the appeal of the dying thief, "*Lord, remember me,*" will hear your heart's earnest cry, will remember you, supply your wants, and renew your strength ; for he is still, and he ever will be, "*Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever.*" Amen.

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